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Homosexual Identity Formation in a Heternormative World

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Abstract

In America, we live in a society where an expectation exists that a child will be attracted to members of the opposite sex until otherwise specified. This heteronormativity is guided by many collective representations and stigmas that devalue lesbian and gay identities. The social constructs of heteronormativity and devaluation makes the process of homosexual identity formation very difficult for adolescents to progress through. Interactions that reinforce positivity about being gay or lesbian and overcome its stigmatization are crucial for an adolescent to fully accept and form this part of him or herself. My experiences as an adolescent struggling to form a lesbian identity, combined with three other oral histories of the lesbian or gay identity formation process help to illustrate and evaluate the formation process, and the impact of heteronormativity each step of the way.

Overview

In each society, history, language, and the media shape the norms for sexual orientation. While American culture has advanced to bring homosexuality into the public sphere, along with it came stigmas and differentiations that make homosexuality a devalued social identity (Bruce and Ellis 2005). Heteronormativity is the presumption that every individual who grows up will have a heterosexual orientation; in the United States, it forces gays and lesbians to step outside of societal norms to accept and form their sexual identities. When adolescents are questioning their sexuality, they must come to the realization that to claim a gay or lesbian identity is to go against what has been presumed about them their entire lives. This can cause identity conflict and associated emotional distress. The differentiated collective representation of homosexuality in the United States is due to its heteronormative past and present.

While the norms that are disinclined to homosexuality have still not been changed, there has been some progress towards social acceptance in other ways. At first homosexuality only occurred in secrecy, but both key social movements and eventually legislative attempts at equality have sought to change the status of homosexuals in America. Prior to the 1960's, gay and lesbian relationships were not discussed and were instead assumed to be non-existent, even though there has been much historical evidence that these relationships did exist. The sexual revolution of the 1960's was the first attempt to bring homosexuality out of the shadows. Whether or not it was approved of, at least men and women were no longer forced to hide their feelings towards members of the same sex from public view.

Before the sexual revolution, homosexuality was so suppressed that if discovered, it was considered to be a mental disorder (it was finally declassified as such by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973) (Edwards and Brooks, 2000). Men and women could not publicly be with the person they loved if that individual belonged to the same sex; to do so was to risk being diagnosed with a mental disorder and consequentially taken into a psychiatric facility. Regardless of the cost, many people still risked same-sex relationships in private. Rupp describes this in her research on dissertations written by graduate students in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender, referred to as LGBT studies:

> one of the first ways that the history of same-sex love transformed conceptions of heterosexuality was through the exploration of female romantic friendship, which showed us that quite a lot of love coexisted with heterosexual married life

> from the late eighteenth into the early twentieth century. (Rupp 2010, 160)

The woman's role in the home, created by heterosexual standards of marriage, may have been key in allowing the opportunity for women to explore and form relationships with one another.

Although the sexual revolution helped to bring many homosexuality cases into public view, it did not create sudden social acceptance. In fact, a lot of individuals who chose to be open about their sexual orientation faced extreme prejudice and hate. While the sexual revolution is described as "a revolutionary uprooting of traditional sexual morality," the General Social Survey from 1973 to 1989 shows that the majority of Americans still regarded "sexual relations between two adults of the same sex" as always morally wrong (Smith 1990, 415, 424). So with society still regarding homosexuality as wrong and immoral, gays and lesbians turned to law in order to gain the freedom to openly love whomever they choose.

As more people became open about their homosexuality, legislative proposals for marriage and other LGBT civil rights began to crop up. The first state to legalize same sex marriage was Hawaii. Passed by the state's supreme court in 1993, this was eventually overturned by a constitutional amendment and it is still illegal in Hawaii. However since then, eight states have successfully legalized same sex marriages or civil unions (Bond and Smith 2011). Another major step in civil liberties for gays and lesbians occurred in 2003, when the court case *Lawrence v. Texas* invalidated state bans on consensual sodomy (Lawrence v. Texas 2003). Prior to this, mainly in the South, participating in sexual acts with members of the same sex was actually against the law, completely delegitimizing homosexual relationships. Historically, homosexuality has made a transition from being completely delegitimized, to being more widely socially and legally acceptable. But there is still a long way to go for homosexuals to achieve social and legal equality in the United States of America.

History is not the only tool that has shaped the way homosexuals are viewed today. Language also contributes to both the current collective identity of the LGBT community and the attitudes from other collectives towards homosexuality. Language is a device developed for communication, but the way we communicate as a society about certain topics perpetuates the negativity that is associated with the terms themselves. There are ample derogatory slang terms that are used to slander and demean gays and lesbians, but this is the case for almost for any stigmatized group in society. It is the nature of the basic language used to define and identify homosexuals that sets them apart from the norms and standards of society. When social scientists study homosexual behavior in an attempt to look for a cause or explanation, it turns same-sex attraction into a societal abnormality. There are many theories from biological to social psychological stage theories that seek to explain how and why homosexuality develops (Edwards and Brooks 2000). These theories operate under the presumption of heteronormativity. Even science perpetuates the stigmatization of homosexual identities, but society still has the expectation that individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex should accept the identity through self-definition if they want to engage in homosexual relationships.

Defining sexual orientation perpetuates the difficulties and social stigmas attached to homosexuality. In their chapter on sexual identity, Brooks and Edwards state:

> The power of language and discourse to privilege or marginalize is particularly noticeable in relation to sexual orientation because it is an otherwise invisible difference between people that is dependent on the speech act for its identification. (Edwards and Brooks 2000, 55)

The authors discuss that by labeling sexuality, we must also label the differences in individuals. In a society where these particular differences are not perceived as good, it becomes impossible to get around the stigmas associated with the very nature of one's sexual identity.

Language and history shape collective representations of certain groups in society, often via mainstream media; through recent technology, these representations have now developed the ability to spread rapidly. The news, television shows, films, and the Internet are prime sources of information to adolescents. Gay and lesbian teens are portrayed

throughout these sources as being bullied and harassed when they openly identify their sexualities. While public figures such as Ellen DeGeneres and Neil Patrick Harris have emerged as icons of the gay and lesbian community, and it is more common to see a gay or lesbian couple on a television show, these positive homosexual relationships or role models are primarily adults.

In movies about gay adolescents, characters who "come out" to the world are portrayed as rejecting the standards of society, going against their parents' wishes, and often subjecting themselves to ridicule by their peers (Padva 2007). For example, the satire movie *But I'm a Cheerleader* is about a girl sent to heterosexual rehabilitation after her friends and family decide she is a lesbian. It may be sardonic, but it is portrayals such as these that promote heteronormativity and create the fear of rejection in adolescents who may be questioning or exploring the depths of their sexuality. These outlets of information available to adolescents about homosexuality not only encourage adolescents to suppress differences in sexual orientation, but further the impression that gays and lesbians should be stigmatized and that it is okay to treat those teens poorly.

There are online projects that attempt to help gay and lesbian adolescents who are dealing with bullying. One in particular titled the "It Gets Better Project" attempts to help through videos from famous politicians, actors, and other regular people who have dealt with bullying in the past. Each video sends the message that the homosexual teens are not alone, that things get better as you get older, and that not only is it okay to be different, but that you should be proud of your differences (Savage 2010). It is definitely beneficial to society that some people are trying to reach out to bullied teens to help pull them through the trouble, but the focus is always on embracing the differences that are highlighted through heteronormativity. Instead, the focus needs to move towards changing society's view so that children are no longer socialized to see homosexuality as something so different from what is normal. As long as the difference between gay and straight is imprinted upon young minds as a "them" vs. "us" representation, questioning adolescents will continue to feel on the outside and struggle to accept themselves for who they are.

Literature Review

The assumption of heterosexuality shapes the process of sexual orientation identity formation that everyone goes through. Due to heteronormativity, homosexual identity formation is a daunting process to adolescents and teens, while heterosexual identity formation can almost go unnoticed. There are many models on minority sexual orientation identity formation, and each model stresses the importance of the individual engaging in a "realization" that they are attracted to members of the same sex and a "reflection" on what this will mean for them in the future (Floyd and Stein 2002; Galliher and Glover and Lamere 2009). As a consequence of living in a heteronormative society, American adolescents who undergo the process of self-acceptance and "coming out," two major components in homosexual identity formation, must willingly accept a stigmatized identity as part of themselves. This creates a major strain on these adolescents' psychosocial well-being, throughout the process and specifically during self-acceptance (Halpin and Allen 2004). Adolescents who are unable to overcome societal norms can spend years stuck in the early stages of identity formation, while engaging in a heterosexual lifestyle. However, other more fortunate adolescents, can engage in positive interactions and develop in supportive environments that will help guide them through the stress and difficulties of the identity formation process.

Crucial to each stage of this identity formation—particularly self-acceptance—is positive social feedback, or social acceptance of the individual's homosexual identity. Adolescents commonly find ways to gain positive social feedback through various means. One way is by gaining social connections with other gays and lesbians; this includes finding gay community organizations, forming a relationship with a gay parental figure, and utilizing peer support of other gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents (Nesmith, Burton, and Cosgrove 1999). If this is unavailable and an individual remains entirely in heterosexual social groups, another way to gain positive social feedback is by discussing his or her sexual orientation with close members of the social group and gaining acceptance regardless. Heteronormative society creates the need for this positive social feedback in order for adolescents to be able to gain a healthy

self-acceptance of their homosexual identity, and to overcome the distress of "coming out" with a stigmatized identity.

The various models have different specifics in each stage but they can all be broken down into four stages. The first is questioning: this occurs when an individual initially recognizes attractions to members of the same sex, forcing him or her to reconsider the presumed heterosexuality (Floyd and Stein 2002). Some researchers argue that this occurs before adolescence, but it varies for each individual (Floyd and Stein 2002). The next step is exploration and recognition. In this stage the individual might begin to explore sexual relations with members of the same sex (Floyd and Stein 2002). Another study by Galliher shows that the individual will sometimes engage in heterosexual dating and relationships due to normative pressure during this stage (Galliher, Glover, and Lamere 2009). The third stage involves disclosure and reflection. This decisive stage would be the first step in the "coming out" process. During this stage the individual engages in initial interactions with others regarding his or her attraction to the same sex. If the interaction is positive this will propel the individual's self-acceptance of the homosexual identity (Floyd and Stein, 2002). Lastly, as the individual engages in more positive interactions regarding his or her homosexuality, the final stage will be social disclosure. Stage models stress the importance of parental disclosure because it will allow the individual to form a public identity as gay or lesbian (Floyd and Stein 2002).

Heteronormativity makes this four-step process extremely fragile for individuals. Socialization creates in adolescents the need to fit in and be accepted, particularly when they hold a stigmatized identity. According to research by Halpin and Allen, during gay identity formation, there is a variance in psychosocial well being that correlates to each stage of development. The results of the study show a U-shaped curve, which indicates that individuals experience the most distress during the middle stages of tolerance and acceptance, while the primary stages of questioning, and the final stages of social disclosure are associated with less loneliness and better overall well-being (Halpin and Allen 2004). When individuals must come to terms with a stigmatized identity, they hypothesize how others might see them:

> It is probably that the social environment, homophobia evident within society, and fear of rejection causes much of the distress associated within the formation of gay identity. (Halpin and Allen 2004, 124)

This reinforces the idea that supportive environments and positive interactions may ease distress by lessening the individual's fear of rejection, which can progress the process immensely.

The pressure of going against society's norms and the fear of rejection causes many individuals to stay stuck in the first two stages of the process for long periods of time, most of the time not even realizing that they are there. Authors Kitzinger and Wilkinson, in their quantitative study on Lesbians who came out after maintaining a heterosexual lifestyle for at least 10 years, examined the ways in which women avoided progression to the third and fourth stages of identity formation. Most women had experienced "compulsory heterosexuality," which is where they simply didn't know anything other than heterosexuality; "multiple oppressions," in which women who had other stigmatized identities already simply could not contemplate adding another; and "blocking it out," in which women "refused to allow themselves to address the question 'Am I a lesbian?'" (Kitzinger and Wilkinson 1995, 98). The research may be specific to lesbians, but these seemingly innate and unrecognized means for resisting self-acceptance of a stigmatized identity, can be universalized for any individuals who might get stuck in the process of homosexual identity formation. This stalemate occurs from the difficulties created by heteronormativity; gaining positive social feedback can help ease these individuals into self-acceptance.

Interactions are crucial throughout the process of homosexual identity formation, especially for adolescents because the more positive support one gains, the higher the well being of the individual, which creates more fluid self-acceptance. One way that an adolescent can be guided into self-acceptance is when they are immersed in a social group that contains homosexuality. One study identifies this as one of the positive options after the individual undergoes exploration and recognition:

> responses such as disclosure and social contacts with other gays, lesbians, and bisexuals help to propel the individual toward greater openness and self-acceptance, whereas other responses, such as denial or hiding lead to identity foreclosure or compartmentalization of private and public aspects of identity. (Floyd and Stein 2002, 68)

This suggests that if positive interactions do not occur to promote openness, the LGBT individual can face many identity issues.

Sometimes for gay, lesbian, and bisexual teens it can be a daunting task to surround themselves with supportive individuals to help increase positive interactions during their identity formation process. Research was done on teens that are members of a volunteer center called the Lambert House, a place filled with a community of supportive adults and youth of homosexuality, many who are gay, lesbian, and bisexual themselves. The research shows the ways in which a supportive environment of other homosexual individuals can help adolescents become comfortable with their own sexuality. Many adolescents gained support by adopting a parental figure that completely accepted their gay identity and offered support by giving advice, nurturing, or providing a role model for the youths. Other adolescents simply gained from being surrounded by peers who accepted them, as well as seeing adult examples of happy and successful minority sexuality individuals (Nesmith, Burton, and Cosgrove 1999). These ways in which adolescents might gain social support from other gays, lesbians, and bisexuals imply that not only are there many social needs during the process of homosexual identity formation that must be fulfilled, but that entering into a homosexual friendly social group can provide for many of these needs.

If the individual remains within mostly or entirely heterosexual social surroundings the acceptance of the individual's sexual orientation by close friends becomes even more important to his or her personal acceptance of the identity. The stigmatizations of gays and lesbians can be overwhelming and to have a friendship that breaks down those barriers can reassure the individual that it is possible. Results from a study on cross-sexual orientation friendships show that the disclosure of the information followed by a positive reaction deepens the trust in the friendship (Galupo and St John 2001). The study explains the significance of that trust before the next step can begin in the process of identity formation:

> friendships in adolescence become even more important to sexual minority youth because of parental rejection or fear of parental rejection related to disclosure of sexual-orientation identity. (Galupo and St John 2001, 84)

The relationships and interactions that occur during the self-acceptance stage determine the course of the rest of the process.

Interactions during adolescence help to form many parts of an individual's social identity. When an adolescent is going through the process of forming and accepting a minority sexual orientation identity, these interactions can facilitate or hinder self-acceptance. Increased immersion into social groups where gays and lesbians are already out can really ease the process and create a comfortable environment for the individual to explore and accept. If this is not available, then close friendships that break down the barriers of stigmatization are of the utmost importance to progression in the identity formation. Having any stigmatized identity is a difficult process and many of these identities are part of oneself from birth. But when it is presumed by society that one does not have this devalued identity, the process of discovery and acceptance is a difficult one that needs to be aided by positive interactions in order to help overcome the social barriers that exist and to help the individual cope with the stressors of accepting this identity for themselves.

Research Discussion

Many people hold stigmatized identities that differentiate us within the surrounding society. Thousands of groups who advocate stopping various forms of discrimination argue the solution is to embrace our differences and be proud of the identity we hold. These groups attempt to inspire within society the idea that we are not all so very different, because we are all born with things that make us different in one way or another. But for homosexuals, we are not

born labeled with our differences. When it comes to sexuality, as individuals grow and develop, heteronormativity asserts that we do fit into society's description of normal. The difference between other stigmatized identities and homosexuality is that to continue to fit into the norm against the need to be true to our happiness, as individuals ridden with conflicting desires, we must come to take on and accept the differentiations that society creates. This process takes shape in homosexual identity formation.

LGBT individuals experience this unique identity formation process in various ways due to our backgrounds. Regardless of the variances, we as a collective share similar experiences and hardships due to the effect of a heteronormative society. The findings from both my personal autoethnographical account, as well as the oral histories of three other individuals, show heteronormativity's impact in every step of the homosexual identity formation process. To fully understand how social standards shape the process of a gay or lesbian individual's life, it is important to examine and discuss the similarities and differences in the experiences shared by myself and the three other individuals. Through the lens of the four-stage process I will highlight the themes that tie together the collective of the gay and lesbian community during each stage.

In the first stage, the questioning stage, an individual has the first inklings that he or she may not be solely attracted to members of the opposite sex (Floyd and Stein 2002). The data identifies that this stage can vary most in terms of what age it starts at, based on the severity to which heteronormative standards have impacted the individual's environment. An environment more exposed to, and comfortable with gays and lesbians, was linked with earlier questioning experiences, while the opposite environment involved later signs of curiosity. This is exemplified in the contrast between Sarah and Rebecca. Sarah's comfortable environment led her to start feeling attractions to members of the same sex as a child, whereas Rebecca had no idea that she might not be straight until her senior year of high school.

The town that Sarah was raised in had a general sense of social acceptance of gays and lesbians. There are openly gay members of her community, some of whom she has a relationship with. This list includes the mayor, a few of her male friends in high school, her brother, and a lesbian couple that moved in next door to her while she was in high school.

> The boys in my high school that were gay: everyone loved them, everyone wanted to go to prom with them…. The Lesbian couple [In] my community, it's actually kind of funny, they are very respected because they are very involved with the community, but if they are ever referred to—you see it—I come from a small town, so they are the token lesbians. (Sarah, May 2012)

Sarah makes it apparent there may be labeling, but there is not discrimination against these women and overall they are accepted as prominent community members.

When asked what age she first realized her attraction to females, she explains how it started at quite a young age, but she was not fully aware of what the feelings meant.

> I remember having this huge crush, I didn't realize my feelings were, that, until I look back on it, but I had this friend that came over. I was probably eight or nine, and I remember… I was just really attracted to her. But I was young, so it wasn't necessarily manifested in the same way, but it started pretty young. (Sarah, May 2012)

She continues to explain that she did not realize that these feeling were different from what she was supposed to feel at such a young age. Heteronormativity tells women we are to be attracted to boys, so when Sarah had feelings for a girl when she was younger, she could not recognize it as attraction, even though she grew up in a town less heterosexually dominant than most.

In the case of Rebecca, she progressed from a completely un-diverse community, to having two separate social groups, one completely accepting of homosexuality and the other obviously uncomfortable with it. She described her hometown as the second least diverse city in the United States; everyone is white, middle class, and Catholic. The overall com-

munity mood on homosexuality is apparent in her description her friend from high school who had come out:

> I gave Kyle a lot of respect because he tried to start Pride at our school, because we don't have that, and he tried to start it and he was getting a lot of crap from more of the popular guys in our grade… and it was kind of just pushed under the table, everyone was like yeah we'll get to it, and then Kyle graduated so now there is like no one. (Rebecca, May 2012)

It seems that anyone who did not seek exposure to homosexuality would be completely unaware of anything other than heteronormativity. When asked if her parents ever made her aware of their feelings towards homosexuality she claimed, "My mom is really awkward about it," and "My dad would probably just ignore it." In addition to her parents, she explains her closest friends and her perceptions of their acceptance of homosexuality.

> My friends from home are all gorgeous, straight, textbook perfect girls, athletes. So, I have never really had a conversation with them that would disclose if they were okay with it, but I'm pretty sure they are not like, against it. (Rebecca, May 2012)

Rebecca spent her whole life growing up in a community where heterosexuality was rarely questioned, or defied. This has clearly affected her late start to the questioning process of homosexual identity formation.

When I asked her if she ever felt an attraction to girls at a young age, she responded with a description of her lack of feelings for either sex.

> I feel like I was like asexual until high school, I was just doing my own thing, playing sports. I had a boyfriend in sixth grade, maybe for a day. But I really didn't get involved… so no.

This is interesting, because instead of actively engaging in a heterosexual lifestyle, she simply chose to focus on other things, ignore any question of sexuality altogether. Rebecca had heterosexual interests as she became older, but this became intertwined with her attraction to women. She describes the first time she ever had a flicker of questioning of her presumed attraction to males.

> Before I came to college I played basketball, and not to be stereotypical but there are a lot of gay girls that play. There was this girl Joelle who played for a different basketball team and she was gay. She had a girlfriend that was on another basketball team that we played too. But someone on our team got Joelle's number and was texting Joelle… She asked her, 'Who on your team is gay?' I got a little nervous about that because I was like—I don't know I just thought the girl was going to say 'Oh yeah that Rebecca girl is gay' and I wouldn't have known what to do. So I guess I was just always kind of curious I would say… Senior year. (Rebecca, May 2012)

Rebecca never thought she might be a lesbian, until she was concerned that someone else may have seen her that way. This reflects her concern for defying the norms in her town. There must have been something to make her imagine that others would see her as gay. After this incident she continued to question her status as a heterosexual in society, but not until her environment shifted to college did she fully begin to question her capacity to be attracted to women.

These interview segments shed light on the very initial impact heteronormativity has on adolescents. To someone who may never have dealt with questioning his or her identity, this may seem arbitrary. But take into consideration Rebecca's description of feeling asexual; since straight was the only option in her town, she never let herself feel attraction to anyone. When she finally considered other options, her first experience was fear-based—that someone may have thought she was a lesbian. It seems that her environment, compared to that of Sarah's, put her on an uneven playing ground. She now has much farther and longer to go in order to understand herself and get past the image of normal embedded unconsciously into her mind by heteronormativity.

The second stage occurs when the individual takes action regarding the questions of his or her sexuality. The stage concludes with some form of self-acknowledgment of same-sex attraction, which can no longer be ignored. This stage is called exploration and recognition (Floyd and Stein 2002). Some individuals, like Sarah, move through this stage and rapidly accept their attraction to the same sex. But for others like my grandfather and myself, it can be very easy to get stuck here for far too long. One of the most direct and displeasing effects of heteronormativity is the attempt at heterosexual relationships that many men and women make before they finally discover who they will truly be happy with. It took me almost five years of actively and unhappily dating males to discover that my affection for a female was far greater than any liking previous. My grandfather, on the other hand, spent his entire life maintaining a heterosexual relationship with my grandmother, and he may never have admitted to himself his attraction to men. This disastrous effect of heteronormativity leaves so many gays and lesbians stuck in the exploration stage—attempting to explore themselves into a heterosexual and normal life. These descriptions explain the lack of satisfaction and completeness in life derived from this occurrence.

My autoethnography describes my conflicts with heterosexuality that I did not even realize existed. I was so convinced that straight was my only option, and I was destined to spend a lifetime married unhappily because I had no ability to love. Because society had me convinced homosexuality was never even an option, I placed the blame in myself. I think this is a common theme among gays and lesbians who attempt to maintain unhappy heterosexuality. Below I briefly explain my experience with this heterosexual lifestyle.

> In my freshman year of college I joined women's rugby. I discovered that there were quite a few lesbians on the team, and while surprised, I ignored any curiosity I may have had in the past to assert my identity as straight. I never lacked a boyfriend and would go from one to the next, never giving myself the time to feel alone. My best friend from home, Glen, was coming up to school in the spring semester. I felt certain he would be the boy I would finally fall in love with. I was so sick of moving from one to the next because I could not maintain any feelings for them for very long. But when he got to school, it ended in a disaster. My parents had gotten married their sophomore year in college, and my sister had met her now 8 year boyfriend her freshman year. I knew this wasn't normal, but I was starting to feel as if I was just not capable of love. But I moved on and started to date Andrew. He was the first very serious relationship I had, and we dated for seven months. I was convinced I was in love. (Kathryn, May 2012)

My final attempts to be normal did not stay that way for long. The comfort of exploration my new surroundings provided me with greatly conflicted with my deeply rooted heterosexual persistence.

> About a month after being on the team I started to get a definitive friend group. In it were two out lesbians—this was a first for me. I had never before been able to say I was a close friend with a lesbian. The rest of my friends did not necessarily have a defined sexuality, except a few who were very straight. One of the lesbians was Annie, a girl who I immediately felt close with. I thought she was cute and funny, and because sexuality was so loosely defined with my friends I felt okay. (maybe a little awkward) to flirt with her. We kissed a few times, but nothing made me say I was attracted to all girls. By spring semester we joked that I was an "Annie enthusiast". (Kathryn, May 2012)

These first steps into exploring homosexuality were confusing and exciting at the same time. I was happy to suddenly have the idea that there was another option out there. But I only felt safe exploring under the cover of my strong heterosexual identity and maintenance heterosexual relationship.

This safe exploration zone came crashing down as I started to really develop an attraction to Annie. My heterosexual shield from society made me who I was

at that point, as unhappy as I may have been. But the exploration and the shield began to collide:

> One night during an argument Andrew questioned me to see if I had feelings for Annie. My feelings had skyrocketed for her, and this was my chance to let it out. But I couldn't. I was determined to prove to my family, my friends, and myself that I could keep a relationship with a boy. I told him I did like her, but it was nothing and I was sure I was straight. After assuring him he had nothing to worry about I made it the last few weeks of the school year making my very best attempts to ignore my true feelings, and prove I could be a good heterosexual girlfriend. I want to say now that I regret not fixing it then, but I don't. I wasn't ready to accept my attraction to girls yet. I needed the whole summer to ignore any thoughts that I might be gay. But finally when I came back to school I realized I could not spend another year pretending to like Andrew, so I let the relationship go. (Kathryn, May 2012)

Heterosexuality may have been a very unpleasant experience for me, but when society tells you it is the way you should be, most individuals feel the need to try it out at the very least, regardless of homosexual inclinations. For me that test drive was a desperate attempt to cling to normalcy and force it to work as long as I could. Luckily five years of active attempts to conform to society's standards was not that long in the scheme of things.

My grandfather was not as lucky as I was, and roped himself into a lifetime of miserable heterosexual marriage. Due to the time period, his role as a father, and his Navy career, forming and accepting a homosexual identity would have been going against every other identity he held. My mom describes why later in his life, when he did develop feelings for a man, he did not become open about it.

> At that point, he wouldn't have admitted it because of his family, he loved us. He wouldn't have left my mother because she was in her 50's and had not worked at all. It was a different time and it wasn't as if he could just say, okay I'm gay, I'm out of here, he couldn't do that. She would have had nothing to do; she wouldn't have survived at that point. I think when he finally came to terms with it—I don't think he actually denied it to everyone else, I think he denied it to himself. (Denise, May 2012)

Not only does my mother believe that my grandpa was never able to come to self-acceptance of his identity because of the social institutions to which he belonged, but she thinks he cared too much about his family to admit to himself he could deviate from heterosexual society.

Even though my grandpa never admitted to any relationships with another male, or attraction to men, my family figured out that he was in love with one man.

> I was the youngest, and after I left for college my father started traveling a lot more with his job, and his colleague that he traveled with was, Stan, and Stan became his best friend and they did everything together. Stan was gay, openly gay, and was diagnosed with AIDS and my father was his best friend. Stan came to the funeral, my dad died before him. He was in a military hospital, a veteran, a navy career, so he actually died of 'pneumonia and a brain swell', but the months before he died he lost so much weight. (Denise, May 2012)

The implications of this description by my mother are that even in death, the social institutions to which we belong put so much weight on who we can, or cannot be. If someone's other identities that revolve around heterosexuality are salient enough to who an individual feels he or she is, then they can completely shut down a new homosexual identity formation that goes against the other identities. My grandfather could not be honest even in his dying days. It was too far-gone for him to make any last attempts to be openly happy with the man he really loved.

Heteronormativity creates this second stage trap. It causes so many, like myself and my grandfather to spend various amounts of time trying to live a

lifestyle we are not meant to. If the presumption of heterosexuality were nonexistent there would be no force driving us to format ourselves to society's description of how we should be. Only stories of those who have lived the heterosexual lifestyle, and have either been exposed or given it up, can be counted. There must be many more who live an incomplete life, not understanding that it is okay to explore their sexual orientation.

tIf an individual can move on to the next stage, they are making progress towards self-acceptance of the homosexual identity. The third stage is the first step in the coming out process. This stage, disclosure and reflection, involves the individual's first attempt to reach out and tell someone else that they think they might be gay or lesbian. This part is so crucial because if the reaction given is not positive, it may retrogress them in the process for a while, until they are ready to re-evaluate and try to tell someone else. Only Rebecca and myself had moved onto this stage in the process. Our stories show similar experiences. We both depict the hesitation caused after a negative first disclosure, as well as the next, more positive feedback we get that helps to pull us through. For another issue of identity, when others disagree with your claim to it, it never changes your belief that you may have it. But with homosexuality, heteronormativity makes any claim to the identity very fragile.

For Sarah, her initial attempts to discuss her sexuality with her brother were not as successful as she had hoped.

> The first person I told was my brother, I told him Chris, you know I think I might be gay, because I want to kiss this girl Chelsea. He answered, no, I don't think you're gay because it would be weird to have two gay kids in the family, it's just a phase, and it would just be weird. And then I stopped, that put me back a few steps. It was a big thing for me to tell my brother, especially someone who I thought I could—since he's gay and came out to me—I thought I could have that conversation with him, So that was a little rough. (Sarah, May 2012)

Sarah goes on to explain that it never made her question her sexuality, she was always very sure of her attraction to women, but even so, the insight that this sexuality may not be socially accepted caused a brief hesitation before her next attempt at disclosure, this time more successful. It is interesting that her overall environment made her comfortable in self-acceptance, because she knew and could understand that it was okay to be gay, but her individual interactions caused her to pause in the "coming out" process.

I also never completely reconsidered my sexual identity. My friends from school had always been okay with homosexuality, and it made me realize that I could be who I wanted, at least in one place. But when it came to telling my friends and family at home I was terrified. I knew that it would catch everyone completely off guard. I explain my first experience telling someone outside of my safety net at school in the following passage.

> I have had several of my friends tell me that they did not think I was gay, but most of those were after I had already moved into the fourth stage, and so I did not care as much. One experience that did throw me off, though, was losing my best friend Nikky. She started to change when she went away to college, becoming more of a party girl and a little more judgmental. But she was still my best friend. She had been my first friend when I moved to New York, and we were inseparable throughout high school. She came to visit me at school last spring, I remember being so incredibly nervous for her to discover most of my friends were gay or bisexual. But one night that she was here, she saw me kiss Annie. This changed everything. While she was here she acted completely fine with it. She told me it was perfectly normal to be attracted to girls and definitely not a big deal, but I could see she was very uncomfortable. When I called her this year and told her I thought I might be gay, she just seemed very surprised, almost in disbelief. I soon had a girlfriend and she was one of the few who knew at first. She immediately could not hide her discomfort with it. She talked around the subject. When I came home

> and visited her she made it a point to tell me about all the guys she likes, and if I mentioned something about my girlfriend she would just say 'Oh' or 'OK.' Unless I made plans to hang out with her, we never hung out anymore because she would not call or text me. Finally I confronted her and told her she had to stop treating me differently because I was the same person I always was. I instantly knew by her reaction that she had no desire in continuing our friendship. She told me I was imagining it and that I could talk to her again when I realized she was no different at all. So I never talked to her, and she has yet to contact me. (Kathryn, May 2012)

Since I already had a girlfriend at the time, I knew I was a lesbian. I was lucky enough to have this outlet to keep my head together during this time. But it did take me much longer after that to tell anyone else from home. I was very scared that my other friends and my family would judge me and write me off the way Nikky did. It made me feel as if I was going to have to keep my love for my girlfriend a secret forever, which seemed impossible because I wanted to share her with everyone. Having a place where heteronormativity does not matter as much kept me anchored during this difficult process.

The people whom Sarah and I both chose to first disclose to, had no idea how significant their inputs would be on us. It is so important that anyone who is this key person of disclosure to the individual allow the individual to feel comfortable and accepted. The influence that the words of those who we choose to disclose to is so strong that if Sarah or I didn't have other outlets that let us know homosexuality was okay in some way, it could have pushed us both back in the process, taking away the small amount of self-acceptance we both felt. In stage three, the individual has already accepted homosexuality as something that will make him or her happy; it is something that is a part of who they are and want to be in life. So any hesitation from those who we disclose to makes the concept of living happily and accepted seem extremely out of reach. This is why so many individuals who do not receive positive reactions face identity crises and can blame themselves for their lack of social acceptance when heteronormativity is the real culprit.

The fourth and final stage in the process is social disclosure (Floyd and Stein 2002). This includes telling one's parents about their sexual orientation, and being open about it in most social situations. To understand how the individual takes the final step in accepting him or herself, we must look at what brings the individual to this place. In the description of telling our mothers, both Sarah and myself show our hesitation to bring it up with them. The matter was only discussed when we were both completely certain that our feelings for women would never go away. The similarities in our stories are fairly striking in that we both had girlfriends for a long time before our mothers finally asked us if we were gay. Our parents also fall subject to the heternormative standard, which prevents an open line of communication between parent and child on homosexuality. A parental figure that might otherwise be very helpful in making life changes can appear off limits to the child who feels the need to figure out his or her sexuality before burdening the parent with disclosure.

The description Sarah has of the conversation with her mom highlights both her reluctance to share her sexuality with her mom, and her assurance of it prior to telling her.

> I don't fully remember the conversation with my mom, I know it was a tougher one. My parents are divorced so I told them on separate occasions, and I was dating a girl for about six months before I told my mom. She had asked me several times: 'Are you gay?' and I said 'No, no, no' and each time I said it with more conviction as to shut that down, I didn't want it. Finally I sat her down and said 'Mom, I have to tell you something.' She said 'I know… Jane' that was the name of my girlfriend and I said 'Ok' and I sat there… it was very intense and dark in the room, and when I asked her if she had anything to say, she said 'No, I don't really care what you do with your life,' but it was a little more abrasive then a comforting tone, so we left it at that and

> I got nervous so I left, and now she is fine. (Sarah, May 2012)

With her first attempts to deny her sexual attraction to women to her mom, Sarah demonstrates that even while she had a girlfriend, she did not want to acknowledge what her mom expected. It is clear that because of the pressure from parents for their children to fit into a heteronormative lifestyle, it takes some type of realization that this is a definitive part of one's life in order for him or her to break the news to the parent that their child will not be fitting into heteronormativity.

In my experience, I was so scared of my mom's reaction that I actually felt that I had to show her I was happy with homosexuality before I felt she would believe me in any way. My lifetime of heterosexuality had led my parents to think I was very straight, but I had never specifically told them I was not gay. Heteronormativity had done that for me.

> I never sat my mom down and told her I was gay. I was really against doing that. By the time I was sure enough to tell her, I already had a girlfriend and just wanted my family to accept her. Instead of having the conversation that most people do, I brought my girlfriend to Thanksgiving with the family. I introduced her as a friend, but we liked each other so much and it was very obvious. The next morning my girlfriend left and my mom approached me as I was leaving the room. She said 'is there something you want to tell me?' I asked her what she meant and she responded, 'Is Annie gay?' I told her yes. She asked if Annie was my girlfriend and I told her yes again. She then asked if that meant I was gay and I mumbled something along the lines of… umm hmmmm maybe. No matter how much I wanted to tell my mom I got nervous when it came time to do so. She said nothing at first, and later came into my room to tell me that she loves me no matter what. But she just wants her child to have the easiest life possible and as a lesbian I was not going to have that. Over time she has gotten slightly better at talking about it, but according to my sister she will never fully accept me as lesbian, until I graduate college and have more straight friends. (Kathryn, May 2012)

Like most children, I have always wanted to make my mom proud of me. Heteronormativity tells me that to do this I must marry a male. This appears to be the idea that most adolescents struggle with in the final stage.

Most gay and lesbian adolescents fear that their parents will only be proud of them if they subscribe to heterosexual norms. The two experiences share this commonality through their allusion to extreme reluctance to disclose with both mothers. Personally, I have always known that my mom only wants the happiest life for me possible. But even with this knowledge I still felt as if I would be disappointing her to not fulfill her heterosexual expectations for my life. The relationships that both of us were in when we came out to our mothers has two linked implications. The first is that we needed to be very secure in our desires to live a permanent homosexual lifestyle before we would shatter their desires for us to have a socially normal life. The next is especially relevant for me; the relationship provides the evidential backing for a mother who might otherwise question the accuracy in her child's claims of being gay. No one wants to feel that by being true to themselves they might be crushing their parent's expectations. Heteronormativity creates these expectations and then forces the child to find himself or herself without the help of a parental guide, and even after being assured in one's own identity, some have to worry that their parents will not believe or accept them.

Through the discussion of the four-step process in progression towards homosexual identity formation, key similarities and differences proved significant. It is clear that the degree of exposure to homosexuality shapes development of individuals, and welcome environments can lead to much earlier questioning and acceptance. The second stage is where many individuals remain for long periods of time, usually through devotion to fitting into the norms of society. The third stage of initial disclosure can cause turmoil if it is not met with positivity, but hopefully

will only lead to temporary setbacks. The final stage can be the most strenuous for those who make it there. Parental disclosure removes all cloaks of normalcy for individuals and while an individual is typically confident in their homosexuality before telling a parent, it nonetheless completes the gap in self-acceptance. The strain and distress on homosexual individuals caused by heteronormativity is an issue that can be eased with open, positive discussion of homosexuality as an option and a movement away from being more publicly discrete in lesbian and gay relationships. With these things adolescents may come to realize that not only is it okay to be gay, but it is an actual potential option for their future.

In Halbwachs's chapter on "Social Classes in Their Traditions," he explains how traditional values are utilized in societal transformation:

> A society does not proceed from one organizational structure to another through the conscious effort of its members, as if they build new institutions in order to recap actual advantages from their efforts. We might say that the new ideas became salient only after having for a long time behaved as if they were the old ones. It is upon a foundation of remembrances that contemporary institutions were constructed. For many of them it was not enough to demonstrate that they were useful to make them acceptable. They were forced to fade into the background, so to speak, in order to make apparent the traditions behind them which they aspired to replace and with which they tried in the meantime to fuse. (Halbwachs 1992, 121-126)

In this analysis of the feudal state's decline in Western Europe, Halbwachs discusses the role of particular social traditions to stay rooted throughout changing social institutions. It is within the very nature of social change to utilize certain relevant traditions to inspire the change to take place. But within the usage of these traditions—he is here referring to social hierarchy—they become a part of the new ones, causing the true attempt for reform to be overshadowed by the maintenance of the traditions. The way the society works necessitates traditions; even if they are not right, they have worked in the past and therefore benefit enough people to ensure their maintenance.

This idea may be utilized in the text to discuss feudalism, but it is relevant to American society's inability to shift away from heteronormativity. The tradition of men and women being together is based upon reproduction, and the familial unit. But now that society has progressed to understand deeper conceptions of love, homosexuality has moved into public view. The social hierarchy, unaccustomed to including gay and lesbian individuals, placed us at the bottom. It then becomes a cycle that is very difficult to overcome. Gay and lesbian individuals are given a lower status because they deviate from the norm. But they deviate because it is based in tradition, regardless of the actualities of modern times. Even if the majority of the population today remains heterosexual, socialization based in tradition has told them to be this way. Of course so many people claim obvious attraction to the opposite sex, but with heteronormativity standing in the way, how are we to say that this is caused by anything less than our traditions?

In her chapter, "Who Owns the Past?", Margret MacMillan describes the importance of narratives in collective memory:

> Collective memory is more about the present than the past because it is integral to how a group sees itself. And what that memory is can be and often is the subject of debate and argument where, in Halbwachs' words. 'Competing narratives about central symbols in the collective past, and the collectivity's relationship to the past, are disputed and negotiated in the interest of redefining the collective present.' While collective memory is usually grounded in fact, it need not be […] it can be dangerous to question the stories people tell about themselves because so much of our identity is both shaped by and bound up with history. (MacMillan 2008, 48-49)

The collective memories we hold are grounded in narratives that explain why we are who we are. The collective identity shaped by these memories is key

to not only how a group sees itself, but also how other groups see and identify that group. Narratives are based on historical accounts, both collective and individual, and the historical accounts are formulated in memory by identity. Therefore the inaccuracies in narratives are almost as essential to their purpose as what actually happened.

This idea explains how the collective identity of homosexuals has been formulated throughout American history. The past of homosexuality is a very recent one, and prior to the recent history, homosexuality only existed in secrecy. The lack of a collective memory until the 1960's explains why homosexuals can feel so lost while attempting to embrace a gay or lesbian identity. The narratives that do exist more recently are those of prejudice, coming out experiences (that out gay or lesbian can relate to), or the movement for legal equality and freedom. These are all based in differentiating oneself from the norms of society. Homosexual identities are rooted in heteronormativity down to their core.

Conclusion

Our social environments have an enormous impact on not only how others perceive us, but also how we see ourselves. The heteronormative society of America can make it difficult for individuals to see themselves as anything other than straight. The environment in which we are socialized, indicating our childhood communities, and our family values, can greatly affect self-acceptance of a homosexual identity. The process that individuals must face to fully understand who they are as a lesbian woman, or a gay man, is long and rigorous. It is the fault of heteronormativity that so many people get stuck in the stages, never understanding themselves and feeling incomplete. The variety in acceptance that every individual experiences shows that it is possible to make the process easier on adolescents. The heteronormative standards can be loosened and it is essential that at some point they be loosened in the individual's immediate environment if he or she wishes to continue the process. Through the discussions it has become very clear that at some point in the process, regardless of environment, for an individual to fully take on the homosexual identity, he or she must decide that the happiness they will derive from being from the person they love, is greater than the discrimination they will face in a heteronormative society.

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** Names have been changed on the Personal Interviews to protect the confidentiality of the participants. These Interviews were conducted in face-to-face settings on the dates included. There were several consistent open-ended questions asked to the interviewees. Over the course of several hours the interviewees were invited to speak openly with the interviewer about their relevant experiences.*